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Museum to Hone Image of the P.R. Profession



Shelley Spector has collected artifacts, video interviews and books about public relations, the cornerstone of her museum.
Credit Joshua Bright for The New York Times

By CHRISTINE HAUGHNEY

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Shelley Spector, a longtime public relations executive, acknowledges the stereotype of members of her profession as a thorn in the side of reporters, clogging voice mail and email inboxes with endless and often misdirected pitches on behalf of clients.

But with the Museum of Public Relations, Ms. Spector is determined to improve the image of her peers. Over the last 20 years, Ms. Spector has been a collector of artifacts, video interviews and books about public relations.

Late this month, her passion project will be made accessible to the public with a two-year loan of the collection to Baruch College in Manhattan. The cornerstone of the museum, she said, is the papers belonging to Edward L. Bernays, who has been called the father of public relations and who had lofty ambitions for the field.

“We needed to tell the story of why public relations was meant to be practiced,” said Ms. Spector, surrounded by Mr. Bernays’s books and papers in Baruch’s Newman Library. “He wanted to seek a higher level status of it.”

Ms. Spector, president of Spector & Associates in New York, came up with the idea for the museum in 1985 after meeting Mr. Bernays, then 94, at a conference. Shortly afterward, Ms. Spector, along with her husband and business partner, Barry Spector, started interviewing Mr. Bernays about his career. In 1995, after Mr. Bernays’s death, the Spectors were invited by his family to collect many of his records that had not been gathered by the Library of Congress.

With those documents, the Spectors started an online museum, and over time they collected materials from leading public relations executives, including Daniel Edelman, Ivy Lee and Harold Burson. The collection, which they kept in their office, grew to include 500 books, 100 hours of video interviews and 60 boxes of pamphlets and other objects. It also became a rich resource for students; 70 people visited the Spectors to research their dissertations.

Starting on Sept. 24, researchers can make appointments to view the collection at Baruch. Ms. Spector says she hopes that the collection reveals the impact that the industry has had on American business and culture.

She noted how Mr. Bernays worked on the government’s early media campaign presenting the benefits of entering World War I. During the Depression, he persuaded Americans, many of whom were subsisting on coffee for breakfast, to splurge on bacon and eggs, promoting the meal’s health benefits.

One of Mr. Bernays’s biggest successes came back to haunt him, according to Ms. Spector. When Lucky Strike hired him to persuade more women to smoke publicly, he learned that one reason women didn’t buy Lucky Strike cigarettes was because of the brand’s unappealing green packaging. Mr. Bernays organized a campaign to present cigarettes as “torches of freedom” and had debutantes march and smoke in Easter parades.

He later regretted his campaign to encourage more women to smoke. His wife, Doris E. Fleischman, became a lifelong smoker and died of a stroke in 1980. Mr. Bernays spent much of his later career pushing public relations companies not to work with cigarette manufacturers.

“It was his biggest failure,” Ms. Spector said.